10 years after the October 1988 riots

Algeria

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# Algeria's Islamist Movement Victims of Success

**Following the 'bread riots' of October 1988, the Islamist movement was the biggest benefactor of the introduction of democracy in Algeria, quickly amassing huge political support and winning landslide victories in local and legislative elections. But instead of using its newly acquired power to install democratic principles throughout Algeria, the Islamist movement fell victim to its own aspirations. Today, as Algeria observes the tenth anniversary of the October riots, certain conclusions are self-evident. Overall, Algeria's Islamist leadership has proven ill equipped to handle its success or its own agenda.**

## The Riots

The typical Algerian who demonstrated in the country's major cities, now a decade ago, was compelled more by immediate economic concerns than long-term political goals like democracy. For years, Algerians suffered the consequences of failed economic policies and had finally grown frustrated with chronic unemployment, inadequate wages, inflation and substandard housing. Those who took to the streets in October 1988 protested for basic necessities, hoping to get the government's attention if not economic reform.

Political pluralism was not on their agenda: the FLN's (National Liberation Front) one-party system of government maintained such firm control of opposition activities inside the country that it became too difficult to engage in political activism against the State. As such, opposition leaders like Ait Ahmed of the Socialist Front Forces (FFS) and former President Ahmed Ben Bella concentrated their activities within Europe, trying to mobilize Algerians living abroad, not locally, against the FLN's political monopoly. Furthermore, Algerians were disinclined to pursue pluralism as the opposition groups were widely perceived as weak and 'out of touch' with the population.

In this way, the religious Islamist opposition was somewhat an exception. Though active, the Islamist movement was too divided to effectively challenge the state authorities when the bread riots occurred. The Islamists, however, were succeeding in relating to Algeria's disheartened society and capitalizing upon the failure of the FLN's secular approach to development. More importantly, they channelled the population's mounting anger against the government to their own advantage: collecting huge sums of money from donors, they promoted themselves by constructing privately-run mosques and responded to social needs by providing houses for newly-weds and Islamic dresses for young girls.

## Effects of the Riots

Following the October riots, the political liberalization initiated by President Benjedid was welcomed by Algerians of every ideological stripe: in less than six months, more than 50 parties were formed. Unlike any other time, Algerian leaders were now seen debating, criticizing each other and government policies. Behind the scenes, however, the FLN retained its colossal powers and continued to privatize the economy, relaxing laws on importation and price controls.

For the vast majority of Algerians, the quick combination of democratization and privatization was proving disastrous. Government policies were benefiting a privileged few who could seize new opportunities in the markets. In contrast, the Algerian state struggled with international debts due to a sharp decline in oil revenues, forcing the FLN to relinquish some of its social welfare responsibilities, particularly in health care, education and housing.

The government's failure to address the socio-economic problems of the masses had a tremendous impact on the Islamist movement, now legalized and represented by more than 15 political institutions. Specifically, it legitimized the Islamists' struggle for a better state and even rallied enough militant support to make violent change an option. With social disparities even more glaring, the Islamists had become the voice of the impoverished. As democratic change slowly became a part of Algerian life, the Islamist movement was growing rapidly and evolving into the most potent political force in the country.

## Rise of the Islamist Movement

Undoubtedly, the Islamists' greatest success was in connecting with Algeria's abandoned youth – those who failed in school and in the labour market and who were portrayed as society's losers. To them, the mosques became a place of refuge where respect and understanding could be found, where the state's policies and the government's shortcomings were to blame for their personal failures. Armed with a new attitude and seen as being in touch with God, the abandoned youth quickly regained respectability in society, something it clearly owed to the Islamist movement and no one else.

Although the budding Islamist movement was gaining momentum, internal strife hindered its development as a viable political entity. Though bonded by common religious symbols, sets within the movement were increasingly divided over political strategies and ideological issues and appeared to be moving in two distinct directions: one towards greater unification and the other towards fragmentation. Before 1988, many religious and political disagreements were left to be sorted out in the mosques. This continued during the democratization process; all Islamists seemed united in their antagonism towards the secular state, but sharp differences remained over how Islam was to solve Algeria's problems. Ultimately, the mosques themselves became host to disputes, contributing to fragmentation within the movement.

## Ideological Divisions

Divisions within the Islamist movement have existed since the 1970s between the Liberal-Algerianites, Djeza'ara, who advocated an indigenous form of Islamic activism and the Shoyoukh, 'elder persons', who believed in linking Algeria's Islamist movement with the Mashreq's, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. The differences between Djeza-'ara and Shoyoukh have centred on how they perceived the role of Islam in modern society and in governmental policies.

The Djeza'ara have followed Malek Bennabi, an Algerian scholar and philosopher. Educated in France in the 1950s, Bennabi later lived in Egypt and returned to Algeria when it became independent. Bennabi's thoughts encompass elements of Western modernity and Islamic traditions and intend to reconcile these two contradictory facets of Algerian life. To Bennabi, Western civilization can be beneficial to the Muslim world, especially in the areas of science and administration. But Bennabi has also criticized Western civilization for its moral decay and has urged Muslims to be cautious in what they take from it. Bennabi has been influential among university students and others who believe that openness to Western culture is necessary for Algeria's development and, more recently, parties such as the Algerian Islamic Assembly.

In contrast, the Shoyoukh have long contended that the Algerian religious establishment lacked the intellectual background to form a religious doctrine without the Mashreq's help. Many of this group were former students of Sheik Abdel Hamid Bin Badis, the founder of the Ulama Association, a reformist movement formed in 1930 to combat France's colonization and prepare Algerian society for independence. During the 1970s and 1980s, many leaders sought to establish ties with the Egyptian Brotherhood in an attempt to link the Algerian struggle for an Islamist state with others in the Mashreq. Now, the reformist ideas of the Shoyoukh are represented by many moderate Islamist parties, like Hamas, even though an alliance with the Mashreq is no longer sought.

Despite their differences, the Djeza'ara and the Shoyoukh have shared a common disdain for the FLN's overall treatment of religion, especially its moves to impose state control over mosques. Additionally, the two Islamist camps have both supported incremental social change and working to change Algeria's political structure from within society.

Since the mid-1980s, however, this moderate approach has been shunned by the younger Islamist recruits who reject peaceful change and adhere to a strict interpretation of Islamic texts. Known as Salaf, in reference to the followers of the Prophet Mohammed and his way of life, this camp espouses the ideas of many militant thinkers, including Egyptian Seyyed Qotb and Pakistani Abou Alla al Mawdudi. These recruits have come to see Islam through the eyes of Iranian revolutionaries, Afghan rebels and older militant Islamists who have provided literature and tapes about radical Islam. It has been this younger set that has so markedly radicalized the Islamist movement in the 1990s, as many of them have become members of groups preaching violence as a means of change. Consistent with their role models, the ultimate goal of these recruits is to establish a Sharia state, the rule of religious authority.

When the October events occurred, no opposition group – religious or secular – was in a position to effectively organize the Algerian masses with the intent to impose a new political order. In the absence of a charismatic leadership, the Islamist movement grew but the loyalty of its adherents was mostly directed to a local leader, not a national figure. As a result, while the Islamist movement was expanding, it also became increasingly prone to fragmentation. Generally, people were joining Islamist institutions out of religious conviction, not for political reasons. Consequently, many found themselves supporting political parties that did not necessarily represent their views. This was characteristic of the membership of the FIS.

## Rise and Fall of the FIS

Soon after Algeria's democratization process began, the Islamist movement was dominated by a single party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Unlike other Islamic political parties, which had strict recruitment policies, the FIS recruited various types of people, regardless of their educational background, gender or race. This open-door policy gave the FIS a truly populist appeal and helped it to cinch victory in the electoral polls of the early 1990s.

But other FIS policies were partly responsible for the fragmentation of the movement. On several occasions, FIS leader Abassi Madani declined invitations to attend the gatherings of other political parties, even making a mockery of some. Instead of acting as a unifying force within the movement, the FIS alienated the smaller Islamist groups. In addition, the FIS's open-door recruitment policy brought serious divisions within the party's own political structure; with so much diversity, it seemed impossible to maintain the democratic spirit at all times. The FIS's second-in-command, Ali Belhaj, exacerbated the problem with his repeated objections to democracy, calling it an alien concept and a source of evil. Having never visited a democratic state, Belhaj was merely reiterating what other militant thinkers, particularly Qotb and Mawdudi, had written. Still, since the FIS included members from the Djeza'ara, Shoyoukh and Salaf camps, Belhaj's position fuelled more disagreement among the ranks.

It was increasingly evident that for Madani and Belhaj, the struggle in Algeria was not for democracy, but rather for the establishment of a Sharia state. Several instances indicated that the FIS leadership was more interested in accumulating political power than in actually sharing it. The FIS acted as if it were a state within the Algerian state, setting up courts in the mosques to punish violators and creating its own military force, the Armed Islamic Salvation. Furthermore, the FIS leaders appeared tolerant of political violence; they stood silent when militant Islamists from their own ranks formed the menacing Armed Islamic Group. Then, in June 1991, they called for a strike to boycott the country's electoral laws, a strike that later turned bloody as over 500 people died in clashes with the state police. It is also notable that, until recently, the FIS had not condemned the horrific violence perpetrated by some militants against Algerian civilians.

Of all of its shortcomings, the FIS's biggest mistake was to underestimate the Algerian military. With its overwhelming success in the local elections in the early 1990s, the FIS became overconfident, believing that it could topple the military politically. The FIS went so far as to solicit soldiers to join its ranks in an attempt to rescue the State from its malaise of corruption and socio-economic problems. This was a gross miscalculation; the military saw the FIS's call as a threat to its national supremacy. In response, the military forcefully intervened before the FIS could win an absolute majority in the 1992 parliamentary elections and rewrite the Algerian constitution to its own terms. Shortly thereafter, the FIS was officially banned. But since the ousting of the FIS from the formal political arena, the smaller Islamist parties have also failed to lay claim to the Islamist leadership or to put an end to the terrorism carried out by certain extremist groups.

Undoubtedly, the Islamist movement was a major political force in Algeria during the initial stages of its democratization. Ideological fragmentation and the spread of militant Islam, however, has since undermined the movement and spun it out of control. In retrospect, the Islamist movement misused the democratic process, but did not escape the consequences of that abuse. ✦

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